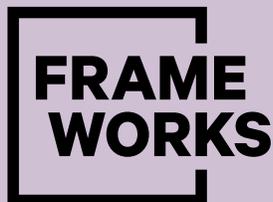


Framing Racial Equity in Adolescence

Messaging Strategies for Social Change

November 2021

**Frameworks Institute
Health+ Studio**



**In partnership with the Funders for Adolescent
Science Translation**

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Introduction

How to use this document

This brief is part of a broader effort to change how we think and talk about adolescence and adolescent development in America. FrameWorks research shows that adolescence is misunderstood and that these misperceptions create obstacles to implementing policies and practices that optimally support adolescents.¹ These messaging recommendations are intended to help advocates, practitioners, policymakers, and journalists working in the youth space communicate more accurately and effectively about racism and equity and their impact on adolescent development.

We're currently at a crossroads. The COVID pandemic and the renewed social justice movement in our country have exposed the vast and widening racial inequities in the United States. They have also created an opening to have more candid, more productive conversation about race, privilege, and justice with a broader audience. If those of us who advocate for youth take advantage of this opening, we can garner support for making our nation's systems and public policies more equitable for young people. If we miss this opportunity and allow harmful narratives prevail, the effects of racism and other identity-based inequities will continue to compound for millions of adolescents of color, impeding many from reaching their full potential. To get to solutions, we need clear, effective ways to talk about racial equity and adolescence, and be ready and able to call attention to the impacts of racism on adolescent development in the United States.

Why connect the issues of racial equity and adolescence? Three key reasons. 1) Adolescence shapes who we become as adults. It's also a formative time in our lives when the effects of racism are amplified.² Providing equitable systems and supports for young people is critical for their healthy development and their ability to contribute to a stronger social fabric.³ 2) Adolescents are exploring their place in the world and are primed for civic engagement and advocacy. They are key partners in dismantling racism. 3) Public policies intended to address racial inequities often fail to consider the needs of young people, or are limited to policies for education or families.⁴

Adolescence—from about 10 years old to our early 20s—is a monumental period of learning, growth, and exploration when we discover, learn from, and adapt to the world around us. It’s a time of opportunity for figuring out who we are and who we want to be as we become more independent and develop relationships beyond our immediate family and community. Adolescents need support, resources, and space to try new things and tackle new challenges to promote their positive development.⁵

Why framing matters. To tackle these issues as a field, we need a shared framing strategy that builds understanding, changes attitudes, and raises support for effective policies around adolescence and racial inequities. Explaining and contextualizing information about race, identity, and adolescence helps us combat the negative stereotypes and unhelpful assumptions that hold back progress on these issues. The recommendations in this brief are based on in-depth research with members of the public and point the way toward more effective communications about racial equity and adolescence that everyone in the field can use.

Recommendation #1: Define and explain equity, inequity, and equitable solutions early and often.

Why this is important:

We can't effectively talk about equity when many people don't understand what "equity" means. In fact, many who hear "equity," first think "home equity." And if prompted many define it as "equality."

What to do:

Across your communications, regularly define, explain, and give examples of terms like "equity," "inequity," and "equitable solutions," and explain how equity is different from equality.

- **Equity** refers to fairness and justice. It means providing what different groups and individuals need to correct imbalances that have resulted from previous unfair, unjust, or unequal treatment. This is different from **equality**, which means treating everyone the same.
- **Inequity** means a lack of justice or fairness.
- **Equitable solutions** are solutions that support different groups and individuals in accessing and receiving what they need to correct imbalances that have resulted from previous unfair, unjust, and unequal treatment.

Definitions adapted from the National Scientific Council on Adolescence 2021 report, [The Intersection of Adolescent Development and Anti-Black Racism](#).

How to do it:

Examples

A UNIVERSAL GOAL

SPECIFIC DETAILS

BROADENED BENEFITS

Many adolescents of color are learning and growing without access to the resources and opportunities that best support healthy development due to inequities **such as economic and social disadvantages that stem from a long history of structural racism and discrimination.**

How do we correct these inequities, **or lack of fairness and justice**, in our society?

What are equitable solutions we can apply **to fix these imbalances?**

Recommendation #2: Don't talk about disparities without naming their causes.

Why this is important:

Research shows that when people consider why social or economic disparities occur, they tend to focus on personal failings or “deficient” cultural values. Without context, these explanations tend to blame and stigmatize groups who are experiencing inequities.

What to do:

- **Don't rely on data alone.** Data needs to be situated within a broader narrative that explains why inequities among young people exist and persist. When we highlight the way our social setup creates inequity, we lead people to see that systems change makes sense and is necessary. Don't mention prevalence rates, correlations, or risk factors without explaining the ways that systems disadvantage certain groups of people.
- **Explain “how it happens” before talking about “who it happens to more often.”** It is especially important to highlight different social contexts, conditions, and levels of privilege that communities experience when raising disparities. Make sure to signpost cause-and-effect relationships by using causal transition words and phrases like “because” or “as a result.”

How to do it:

A UNIVERSAL GOAL

SPECIFIC DETAILS

BROADENED BENEFITS

Try this...

Inequities leading to harmful social conditions impact some young people in our communities more than others. Case in point: Although Black and white youth are roughly as likely to engage in behaviors that could warrant arrest, Black youth are more than four times as likely to be detained by law enforcement.

...Instead of that

Black youth were more than four times as likely as white ones to be detained or committed to a juvenile facility...

Why it works

- Explains why these disparities exist to provide context for the facts
- Without context, there is implicit blame on Black and Brown youth

Recommendation #3: Explain racism as embedded in institutions young people interact with every day, not only as interpersonal experiences.

Why this is important:

Racism manifests itself in different ways, including through internalization of racist beliefs, interpersonal interactions, and through institutions and systems. While most people understand what “being racist” at a personal level means, many have not considered or have trouble grasping how racism and racist practices have been built over time into the systems we access in our daily lives, allowing racism to persist even when individuals within those systems are well-meaning. Identifying and explaining the structural manifestations of racism can:

- Help reduce defensiveness as well as avoidance of responsibility (“I’m not racist,” or “It’s just a few ‘bad apples.’”).
- Build understanding of how unrecognized privilege can lead to microaggressions and unintentional discrimination.
- Explain why racism is so widespread and why adolescents and communities continue to be harmed even if individuals do not engage in explicitly racist behavior.
- Highlight the necessity of changes to policies and systems to reach a solution.

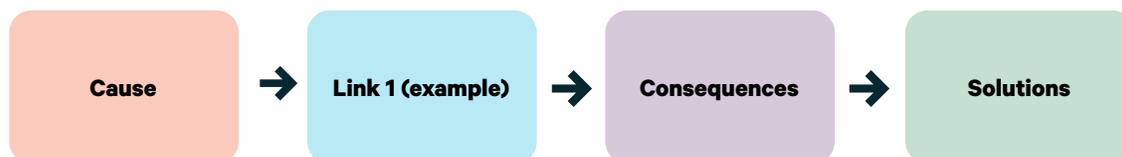
For more information about types of racism and the impact on adolescents, see the National Scientific Council on Adolescence’s 2021 report.

What to do:

- Give clear examples of how racism is built into our institutions, social norms, systems, and policies, such as in education, community resources, juvenile justice, and health care.
- Point out how this disadvantages certain groups and advantages others by limiting opportunities and creating unequal access to resources for people of color.

How to do it:

Make the case using an **explanatory chain**. An explanatory chain helps people connect the dots by offering a sequence of ideas, or steps in a process, that clearly links the underlying causes of problems and their visible symptoms.



Example

Racial inequities built into our education system like the uneven distribution of resources for public schools create opportunity gaps for young people of color. For example, high schools with a student body made up of more than 75% Black and Latinx students offered math and science courses, such as calculus and physics, at lower rates than high schools with more white students. This limits students' ability to gain the knowledge and skills they need to be ready for college. School systems and administrators need to address...

Recommendation #4: “Opportunity for all” is a powerful value for talking about equity in adolescence.

Why this is important:

Although the concepts of “individualism” and “bootstrapping” are deeply ingrained into the American ethos, research shows that the most powerful drivers of upward mobility are environmental factors—which we as a society can impact.⁶ Research shows that talking about the fact that all adolescents should have the opportunity to reach their full potential increases people’s understanding of the need for more equitable systems and policies.

What to do:

- Broaden the goal beyond individual success and emphasize our collective responsibility to create equitable systems and policies that provide “opportunity for all.”
- Focus on how environmental factors (determinants) can limit opportunity and thus how equitable policies and programs can help make this opportunity available to all young people.

- Note that it’s important to distinguish that “opportunity for all” is created both through more equitable access to existing systems, services, and supports (for example, located in my neighborhood), but also through increased availability (for example, creating new programs or services).

How to do it:

Example

A UNIVERSAL GOAL

SPECIFIC DETAILS

BROADENED BENEFITS

“All adolescents in our country should have access to the resources they need to grow into healthy adults—opportunity shouldn’t be limited by a young person’s race. We need policies and programs that ensure that every adolescent has what they need to grow into healthy adults who will create strong, healthy communities.”

Recommendation #5: Use the “Community Connections” value.

Why this is important:

When youth advocates talk about adolescence and racial equity, they tend to focus on the benefits specific to young people. This can create an “us” versus “them” dynamic and turn people off from collective action on behalf of adolescents. Using the value of Community Connections—the idea that supporting adolescents enables them to serve their communities and create a stronger social fabric—sparks a very different conversation than the ones that currently dominate the public narrative about race and adolescence. This value establishes that supporting racial equity matters because it’s about creating stronger, more connected communities. It builds support for collective action and policies that make it possible for all young people to contribute to their communities and thrive.

What to do:

- Use “us” “our” and “ours” as often as you can. Whenever possible talk about adolescence as a shared experience instead of setting adolescents apart as a separate group.
- **Explain the link between adolescent development and community-level outcomes**, don’t just assert or describe it. Make the connection between adolescents’ access to resources and supports, and their capacity for civic engagement. Show how these behaviors produce better outcomes for communities and for society.

- **Use the Community Connections value as an opening** to talk about the needs of adolescents who have been marginalized and lack connection to the opportunities and resources they need to find their place in society. Then use this explanation to open up discussion about how supporting each and every young person leads to stronger communities.

How to do it:

A UNIVERSAL GOAL

SPECIFIC DETAILS

BROADENED BENEFITS

Advance

- Referring to “we” or “our”
- Community benefits

Avoid

- Focusing on deficits
- Using “they” or “them”

Examples

- Supporting adolescents of color and leveling the playing field promotes positive development and supports their skills and talents in ways that will benefit all of us.
- We must make sure all adolescents—and especially adolescents of color—have the opportunities they need to thrive as integral members of our communities.

Recommendation #6: Connect anti-racist advocacy and civic engagement among youth with healthy development of identity and agency.

Why this is important:

Young people have long been at the forefront of positive social change. Youth involvement in anti-racist advocacy and civic engagement supports positive identity formation as well as a sense of agency. These activities can also have a significant impact toward building a more inclusive and equitable society. In addition, focusing on youth civic engagement, service, and activism can help refute negative stereotypes about adolescents.

What to do:

- Communicate that anti-racist advocacy and civic engagement helps adolescents build a positive sense of identity and agency that will benefit our whole society.
- Highlight how anti-racist advocacy can promote more equitable systems across our communities.
- Highlight examples of youth of color are working for the greater good of their communities.
- Talk about the ways in which we can build a society that is more inclusive of young people of color.

How to do it:

A UNIVERSAL GOAL

SPECIFIC DETAILS

BROADENED BENEFITS

Advance

- Multiple future benefits for adolescents and their communities
- Showing (not just telling) by giving examples or relating a story.

Avoid

- Focusing on single-group benefits without tying them to our collective wellbeing
- Presenting youth of color as responsible for battling racist systems imposed by adults.

Example

Communities are stronger and more resilient when youth participate; anti-racist activism among young people can promote feelings of agency and purpose among youth and help bring positive changes to their surrounding communities.

Recommendation #7: Talk about supporting parents not just telling parents what they have to do to support their adolescents.

Why this is important:

Communications to parents of adolescents often provide tips on how parents and caregivers can individually support adolescent development. Today many are targeted toward parents of color with instructions on what they should do to prepare their children for racist encounters

and experiences. This puts the onus for addressing racial inequities on parents, rather than the social systems that perpetuate them. Creating communications that highlight the importance of support for families—not just how they need to support their adolescents—avoids stigmatizing parents and builds understanding about how racial inequities affect parenting.

What to do:

- Communicate that the systems we have in place often determine whether or not families receive or can access the resources they need. For example, race-based wealth disparities can undermine parents' ability to provide a healthy, safe environment for their adolescents to explore and grow.
- Emphasize that equitable, whole-family support is essential for promoting positive development for adolescents.
- Acknowledge families as assets, resources, and partners in the work of supporting young people by recognizing their strengths, and not just the challenges they may experience.

How to do it:

A UNIVERSAL GOAL

SPECIFIC DETAILS

BROADENED BENEFITS

Advance

- Shift the focus from advising parents to improving the conditions in which they parent
- Families as resources, assets, and partners in supporting positive development
- Make the connection between adolescent health and development and social systems that may be inadequate to meet the needs of the whole family.

Avoid

- Don't put the onus solely on parents—societal, systems-level issues affect families and youth.

Examples

Parents and caregivers can be a critical support system to help young people build a sense of resilience and positive identity in the face of racism and discrimination. But race-based wealth disparities can increase parents' own stress levels and limit the resources families have to provide healthy, safe spaces for youth. Programs that support families to build on their inherent strengths have been proven to promote positive outcomes for youth of color.

Recommendation #8: Amplify the voices of youth of color.

Why this is important:

Adolescents are maturing cognitively in ways that help them appreciate the influences and complexities of race and racism in new ways. When we talk about racial equity in adolescents, we need to incorporate the concerns, perspectives, and ideas of “context experts”—the young people most affected by racial inequities.

Centering youth voices also helps avoid the perception that youth of color are one monolithic group. In fact, sharing a racial identity doesn’t guarantee that youth share perspectives on problems, solutions, or even the salience of race in their own lives. When youth talk about their own experiences, they’re more likely to portray the full range of their identities, including the joy of being part of their racial group, and aspects of themselves that aren’t about race.

What to do:

- Include direct youth voices whenever possible in communications about racial equity in adolescence.
- Don’t assume race means the same thing to all adolescents within a racial group.

How to do it:

Example

- “As a student of color, I think it’s important to educate about different racial and cultural histories, and help people build a positive sense of self. Affinity spaces are important avenues for this, but they shouldn’t be forced upon students. Because these spaces should be something we want to create for ourselves, not something an adult makes us do.”
- “It’s important to acknowledge the history of Black people in this country and around the world, remember those that we’ve lost, and actively engage in social change. With that being said, it’s just as important that I remind myself that there is more to my identity as a Black woman than pain, suffering, and grief. There is also joy and happiness and beauty in Blackness, and attending events such as affinity groups and Juneteenth festivals are the perfect way to remind me of that.” –Allyson Nesmith, Vanderbilt University graduate, from her blog post, [The Joy, Happiness, and Beauty of Celebrating Blackness](#).

Endnotes

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About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's

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About Health+ Studio

Health+ Studio is a women-led social impact strategy and communications agency that uses research-informed strategies and programs to eliminate barriers and create opportunities for health and wellbeing. We aim to foster collective impact to create a more just and equitable society for all.

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